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## LIGHT UPON THE SOUL MYSTICAL ASPECTS OF THE FEAST OF EPIPHANY

In the history of the solemnity of Epiphany, there is a striking variety in the name and object of the feast. While in the East, where its origins lay, the birth and/or the baptism of Jesus are considered to be the content of the feast, in the West it was completed by the adoration of the Wise Men, the wedding at Cana and the multiplication of the loaves.<sup>1</sup> H. Auf der Maur speaks of « a great variation in the different churches ».<sup>2</sup> His account of the history of this liturgical feast shows that because of the introduction of Christmas at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century in the East and in Gaul, Epiphany increasingly became the feast of Christ's baptism, but still the diversity remained.<sup>3</sup> That automatically brings us to the question of whether there is a common basis for the multiplicity of this feast. What we are actually looking for is the heortological identity of Epiphany. In this paper we will focus on the thesis that this feast has a strong mystical dimension, that it is a celebration of the mystical encounter between God and human persons. What do we mean by the word « mystical » in this liturgical setting?

The first concept of liturgy formulated by the Second Vatican Council, « The glorification of God and the sanctification of human beings, by which Christ makes the Church to be his companion who invokes the Lord (SC 7) », can be characterized as a dialogical view on liturgy. « Liturgy is dialogue: God's salutary turning towards his people in word and sacrament and the gifted person's answer to God. Both aspects are to be found in every liturgical action ».<sup>4</sup> But when can we say that this dialogue between God and human beings

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<sup>1</sup> H. Auf der Maur: « Feiern im Rhythmus der Zeit I, Herrenfeste in Woche und Jahr », V, from: *Gottesdienst der Kirche, Handbuch der Liturgiewissenschaft*, herausg. v. Hans Bernhard Meyer u.a., Regensburg 1983, 154–164, p. 158v.

<sup>2</sup> Auf der Maur, « Feiern im Rhythmus der Zeit I », 159.

<sup>3</sup> Auf der Maur, « Feiern im Rhythmus der Zeit I », 157–159.

<sup>4</sup> E. Lengeling, in: M. Künzler, *Die Liturgie der Kirche*, Paderborn, 2003–2, 21. Cf. A. Verheul osb, *Inleiding tot de liturgie, haar theologische achtergrond*, Roermond 1964, 14–28; A. Chupungco osb, « A definition of liturgy », in: Anscar J. Chupungco (ed) *Handbook for Liturgical Studies I, Introduction to the Liturgy*, Collegeville 1997, 3–10; A. Gerhards / B. Kranemann, *Einführung in die Liturgiewissenschaft*, Darmstadt 2008–2, 118v.

has a mystical character? A basic idea of mysticism, which is needed to be able to find mystical aspects in the feast of Epiphany, is found in the work of B. McGinn. He gives the following broad definition of Christian mysticism: the human preparation for, the awareness of and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God.<sup>5</sup> McGinn stresses that speaking about mysticism can only be done in a transformative way. K. Waayman calls mysticism a relational process between God and man. He describes the transformative character as follows: «...mystical love purifies the intellect, the will and the memory, until they are completely attuned to God.»<sup>6</sup> This transformation is caused by an overwhelming experience of an ultimate, divine reality. This personal experience of God's presence, described in many different ways, often has a visual character such as what one might call a «light-experience». Seeing and contemplating the light is a constant theme in mystical texts.

Considering the mystical aspects of the feast of Epiphany is a form of theological reflection on the history and the content of this feast in order to clarify its meaning.<sup>7</sup> Of course this paper shows only some fragments and can by no means be exhaustive. We will study three different aspects of the feast. In the first place, we will make some philological remarks on the term that is used as the most important name of it, namely *epifaneia*. In the second place, we will focus on some cardinal moments in the history of the feast in Eastern and Western Christianity. We will study some sermons and liturgical texts that represent a certain phase in its development. Thirdly, we will analyze a number of texts from the current *ordo* of the Roman Catholic celebration of Epiphany; there our attention will be focused, among other things, on the concept of «mystery», with the help of O. Casel's theory. All of these three approaches, relating to origin, history and actuality, are directed towards the question: what is celebrated in this feast? They will give an indication that the solemnity of Epiphany celebrates the unifying encounter between God and his people or the individual believer, expressed in the two images of light and marriage.

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<sup>5</sup> B. McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism, Origins to the Fifth Century*; «The presence of God», *A history of western Christian mysticism* Vol I, New York 1991, XVII.

<sup>6</sup> K. Waayman, «Spirituality. Forms, Foundations, Methods», in: *Studies in Spirituality Supplements*, 8, Leuven-Paris-Dudley 2002, 357.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. J. Geldhof, «Nieuwe wegen en bekende horizonten in een niet meer zo vertrouwd landschap. De theologische studie van liturgie en sacramenten», in: *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 50 (2010) 1,61–75, p. 15v.



## 1 EPIFANEIA AND RELATED CONCEPTS

Although, as was said before, multiple names have been used for this feast, « Epiphany » denotes it pre-eminently.<sup>8</sup> The meaning of this concept therefore plays an important part in understanding the feast. We will focus first of all on the development of this concept and the use of it in different contexts, and will then look for it in the period and the place of its origins.

The Greek word *epifaneia*, appearance or apparition, has a broad application. It can mean: to come into the light, or in view, for example with the sudden appearance of an enemy or with the apparition of a deity to a worshipper.<sup>9</sup> It can point to a manifestation of divine power, or, in the New Testament, to the first or second coming of Christ.<sup>10</sup> It refers to the external side of someone or something, the visible surface of a body or the sudden showing up of something unexpected.<sup>11</sup> Since old times, epiphanies of gods were commemorated and celebrated yearly.<sup>12</sup> In the age of Hellenism this custom continued; it was then that the substantive *epifaneia* also developed in Jewish-Hellenistic texts.<sup>13</sup> Besides denoting « apparition », it is also used for « miraculous intervention ».<sup>14</sup> In addition to this, in the same period another application of *epifaneia* developed, namely the festive and solemn entry of royal persons into a city. The word *parousia*, coming or arrival, was also used for this meaning.<sup>15</sup> In Flavius Josephus both concepts are used in the sense of a helping, divine interference.<sup>16</sup>

The New Testament, like the Greek Old Testament, is reserved concerning the use of the word group *epifaneia*. It uses it in a limited measure, especially in the pastoral letters. The concept is there used for the first coming of Christ, his human birth,<sup>17</sup> and more often for his apparition at his Second Coming,<sup>18</sup> which is in general

<sup>8</sup> In the East: *epifaneia*, *ta fôta*, *Denha*, *theofaneia*; in the West: Epiphania, Adventus, Theophania, Twelfth Night etc.

<sup>9</sup> Liddel-Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford 1961 s.v. *epifaneia*, 669.

<sup>10</sup> W. Bauer, *Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, Berlin 1963, s.v. *epifaneia*, 602.

<sup>11</sup> G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford 1961, s.v. *epifaneia*, 538.

<sup>12</sup> C. Mohrmann, « Epiphania », (1953) in: *Études sur le latin des chrétiens*. Tome 1, *Le latin des chrétiens*, Rome 1961, 245–275, p. 249.

<sup>13</sup> E.g.: 2 Mac. 2,21 ; 2 Mac. 3,24–26 ; 2 Mac. 5,2–4 ; 2 Mac. 10,29–30 ; 2 Mac. 12,22 ; etc. Cfr. Kittel IX, 9.

<sup>14</sup> A. Vermeulen, « Le développement sémasiologique d'*Epiphaneia* et la fête de l'Épiphanie », in: *Supplementa, fasc. I, Graecitas et Latinitas Christianorum primaeva*, Nijmegen 1964, 7–44, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Mohrmann, « Epiphania », 249.

<sup>16</sup> Kittel IX, 2.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Tim. 1, 10 ; Titus 2, 11.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Tim. 6,14 ; 2 Tim. 4,1 ; 4,8 and Titus 2,13.

called *parousia*. In 2 Thessalonians 2, 8 both concepts are combined in the expression « The *epifaneia* of his *parousia* », which may be translated as: the luster of his coming. While both terms refer to an arrival, the meaning of *epifaneia* tends more in the direction of shine, luster, glory, or power. It is striking that in the New Testament, *epifaneia* is mostly used in the eschatological meaning, and that practice did not occur in the antique world. Saint Luke, influenced by the Hellenistic usage, also knows the concept both in a neutral and a religious sense.<sup>19</sup> The New Testament application of *parousia* and possibly also *epifaneia* was borrowed from the above-mentioned cult of the Hellenistic monarchs, the solemn entry into a city.<sup>20</sup> Christ was, in this way, pictured as a sovereign coming in glory and magnitude. The Christian use of the concept of epiphany for the liturgical feast of the 6<sup>th</sup> of January has its roots both in the Hellenistic religious or royal usage, and in the New Testament usage of the term.<sup>21</sup>

The reserve, so typical of the New Testament, with regard to applying *epifaneia* to the person and appearance of Christ, remains in the first period after the New Testament. However, one observes in the Church Fathers that the eschatological meaning, dominant in the New Testament, disappears into the background.<sup>22</sup> Clement of Alexandria and especially Origen, surprisingly, amply apply the concept to the Old Testament theophanies and to Christ, especially to the apparitions after his resurrection, but also to his miracles, while their eschatological use of the term is minimal.<sup>23</sup> Both the revelation in historical events<sup>24</sup> and the spiritual revelation of the truth, the Logos, in the interior of the human person, are referred to by Origen with *epifaneia*, which is a new use of the term.<sup>25</sup> Origen hardly seems interested in the historical dimension of the revelation of Christ, but all the more in « the coming of Christ in the soul », which appears especially in his use of *epifaneia*.<sup>26</sup> In *Contra Celsum* he speaks about the mystical knowledge of the believer to whom Christ will reveal his Father, *tois epifainomenon auton paradechomenois*, to those

<sup>19</sup> Luke 1,78v: « the morning sun from heaven will rise upon us, to shine on those... » ; Acts 27,20, « no appearance of either sun or stars » ; Acts 2,20, as an adjective: « resplendent day ».

<sup>20</sup> Mohrmann, « Epiphania », 253, Vermeulen, « Le développement », 16–18.

<sup>21</sup> Mohrmann, « Epiphania », 254.

<sup>22</sup> E. Pax, « Epiphanie », in: *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, V, k. 832–906, 876.

<sup>23</sup> Pax, « Épiphanie », 876, Vermeulen, « Le développement », 18v, many quotes.

<sup>24</sup> Vermeulen, « Le développement », 27.

<sup>25</sup> Vermeulen, « Le développement », 20, observes that *epifaneia* is used here in a context of spiritual, interior language, possibly prepared by Philo.

<sup>26</sup> Vermeulen, « Le développement », 22.

who receive him in his apparition. He also uses the mystical image of the climbing of the spiritual mountain of the Tabor, where Christ shows himself in his glory.<sup>27</sup> For Origen, the concept of *epifaneia* is strongly connected with the self-revelation of the Logos and the knowledge and the enlightenment of the more perfect Christian. Clement of Alexandria knows this mystical usage of the term in the sense of « the coming and simultaneously the revelation of and the enlightenment by Christ visiting the human soul ».<sup>28</sup> This language is influenced by Holy Scripture, especially Saint Paul, and by Philo, and it developed in the Alexandrian environment.<sup>29</sup>

In the fourth century, in the context of the Arian dispute, *epifaneia*, especially in Athanasius, gains the meaning of: Christ's human birth, incarnation and earthly life, while furthermore *theofaneia* is ever more frequently used for apparitions of God and Christ.<sup>30</sup> This latter term has a more neutral meaning, while the former points towards the radiation of the light in the dark of a heathen world.<sup>31</sup> John Chrysostom asks, in a sermon about Christ's baptism, why not the day of his birth, but of his baptism was called *epifaneia*. His answer: because He became visible for all, not by his birth but by his baptism.<sup>32</sup> Both the aspect of the appropriation of the revelation, and the universal element, the proclamation to all peoples, appear to be present in this concept.

We summarize that in the New Testament, the antique and Hellenistic concept of *epifaneia* was applied to Christ, especially in a new, eschatological meaning. In the third century, with Origen and Clement of Alexandria, the term gains yet another new content. The historical and eschatological meaning disappears and gives way to a mystical meaning, as « enlightenment of the human soul by the Word ». In the same period and surroundings the feast carrying this name comes into being.

<sup>27</sup> Origenes, *Contra Celsum*, VI, 68, in: Origène, *Contre Celse* t. III, trad. M. Borret sj, SC 147, Paris 1969, 348; quoted by Vermeulen, « Le développement » 22.

<sup>28</sup> Vermeulen, « Le développement », 21.

<sup>29</sup> Vermeulen, « Le développement », 32.

<sup>30</sup> Vermeulen, « Le développement », 34v.

<sup>31</sup> Vermeulen, « Le développement », 36.

<sup>32</sup> S. Joannis Chrysostomi, *In homiliam de Baptismo Christi et de Epiphania*, PG 49, 365–366, quoted by Vermeulen, « Le développement », 36.

## 2 SOME MOMENTS FROM THE HISTORY OF THE FEAST

As a Christian feast, the feast of Epiphany likely originated in Egypt at the end of the second or the beginning of the third century.<sup>33</sup> Under the influence of neo-platonic ideas it rapidly developed in the whole Greek-Christian world as the celebration of the self-revelation of the Logos to his Church and to the human soul. We will now take a closer look at a number of crucial texts that show mystical aspects of the feast.

The earliest mention of something like the feast of Epiphany can be found in a short citation in the *Stromateis* of Clement of Alexandria (about 200 CE).<sup>34</sup> He mentions the Gnostic sect of the Basilidians, that celebrated the birth and baptism of Christ in the second century on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January.<sup>35</sup> In their view, Jesus' baptism was the moment of the birth of the divine Logos, the fusion of the human with the divine nature of Christ.<sup>36</sup> We don't know if Clement himself came to celebrate this feast. We do know that he took much interest in Jesus' baptism by John which was, according to Clement, a model for the baptism of Christians who through this rite become children of God, like Jesus was, perfect and divinized. Clement observes that baptism is also called « enlightenment », *fôtismos*, « illumination, en laquelle nous contemplons la belle et sainte lumière du salut, c'est à dire, en laquelle nous pénétrons du regard le divin ».<sup>37</sup> The feast of Epiphany thus commemorates the baptism of the Lord as a model of the Christian baptism, which configures the faithful to Christ and gives them the grace of enlightenment and of seeing the light of God.

Of a second text, the letter to Diognetus (probably Alexandria, end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century), the last two chapters are of interest to us. They are considered to be an appendix, possibly a sermon for the

<sup>33</sup> « We know that already in the late second or early third century the date of 6 January was associated in Egypt both with Christ's birth and with his baptism in the Jordan, and that among some, at least, it was already a liturgical celebration with a vigil », Bradshaw/Johnson, *Feasts and Seasons*, 137.

<sup>34</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* I,21,146, in: *SC* 30, Paris 1951, 150.

<sup>35</sup> Paul F. Bradshaw/ Maxwell E. Johnson: *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity*, Collegeville, 2011, 137v; see also Thomas J. Talley: *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, New York 1986, 117–121; B. Luyckx, « Epiphanie », in: *Liturgisch woordenboek* I, Roermond 1962, k. 687–793, k. 688; « Pax, Epiphanie », 904.

<sup>36</sup> H. Auf der Maur, « Feiern im Rhythmus der Zeit I », 156.

<sup>37</sup> « ...fôtisma de di'ou to agion ekeino fôs to sôtèrion epopteuetai, toutestin di'ou to theion oxyôpoumen,... », Clement d'Alexandrie, *Le Pédagogue*, I,6,26, in: *SC* 70, Paris 1960, 158v.

feast of Epiphany.<sup>38</sup> At different times in it, the appearance of the Logos is mentioned. The next citation makes a connection between appearing, Sonship and being born in the hearts of the faithful: « Though He has existed since the beginning, He came as one appearing newly; though we know Him to be from old, He is born ever anew in the hearts of His saints. This is He who is from everlasting, this is He who is accounted this day as Son ».<sup>39</sup> The final part of the sermon places the emphasis on the knowledge of the heart, by which the Word can be known: « Let the heart of you, then, be knowledge and let your life be true inward reception of the Word. Tending your tree in this way, and gathering its fruits, you will at all times enjoy a harvest that is pleasing to God. »<sup>40</sup> So this text speaks about the inner reception and fruitfulness of Christ in the heart of a human being.

In the course of the fourth century, the feast spreaded into Palestine, Syria, Asia-Minor, and the surrounding areas. In some places, like Jerusalem and Syria, only the birth of Jesus was commemorated.<sup>41</sup> In other places the baptism of the Lord played the main part, and for this reason the sacrament of baptism was also celebrated on this day. In the oldest layer, one did not distinguish between the birth and baptism of Christ, as G. Winkler puts it: « Jesus was born as Son of God with his baptism when the Holy Spirit descended on Him and according to St Luke the voice was heard: You are my Son ».<sup>42</sup> According to an old tradition, expressed by a hymn attribut-

<sup>38</sup> Both Talley and Bradshaw/Johnson mention this notion, Bradshaw/Johnson: *Feasts and seasons* 139, and Talley: *The origins* 123. For time and place of origin, see R. Brändle, Diognet, in: *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*<sup>3</sup>, 3, 239 who says about these two last chapters: « Die liturgisch geprägten Kap. 11 u. 12 sind als Anhang anzusehen. Sie zeigen Nähe zu Hippolyt und Meliton ». Marrou, however, considers them to be from the same author as the rest of the letter, from the environment of Clement of Alexandria. See *À Diognète*. Introduction, édition critique, traduction et commentaire de H.I. Marrou, in: *SC* 33, Paris 1951, 263–265.

<sup>39</sup> Transl. M. Staniforth, *Early Christian writings*, Harmondsworth 1968, 182 « Outos o ap'archès, o kainos faneis kai palaios euretheis, kai pantote neos en hagiòn kardiais gennòmenos. Outos o aei, o sèmeron uios logistheis ». « Lui qui était dès le commencement, il est apparu comme nouveau et fut trouvé ancien et il renaît toujours jeune dans les coeurs des saints. Éternel, il est aujourd'hui reconnu Fils ». *À Diognète*, XI, 4–5, 81.

<sup>40</sup> Transl. M. Staniforth, *Early Christian writings*, 184 « Ètò soi kardia gnòsis, zoè de logos alethès, chòroumenos. Ou xylon feròn kai karpon airòn trugèseis aei ta para Theò(i) pothoumena... »; « Que la science s'identifie à ton cœur; que le Verbe de vérité, reçu en toi, devienne ta vie. Si cet arbre grandit en toi et si tu désires son fruit, tu ne cesseras de récolter ce qu'on souhaite recevoir de Dieu,... ». *À Diognète*, XII, 7–8, 82v.

<sup>41</sup> H. Förster, *Die Anfänge von Weihnachten und Epiphanias*, Tübingen 2007.

<sup>42</sup> Bradshaw/Johnson, *Feasts and Seasons*, 142.

ed to Ephraim the Syrian (died 373), the baptism of Jesus was accompanied by phenomena of light.<sup>43</sup> This notion is also expressed in the name of the feast in Syria, where it is called *Denha*, dawn of light,<sup>44</sup> while in Cappadocia it is referred to as *ta fôta*, « the lights ».<sup>45</sup> The feast may have developed as the celebration of the appearance of the divine light that enlightens every human being, both with the coming of Christ on earth and with his baptism in the Jordan River.<sup>46</sup>

Witnesses of another historical phase of this feast, its celebration in Cappadocia, are two sermons by Gregory of Nazianzus. The first, given on what he calls « the holy day of lights » and the second, a much longer one, on the next day, both explicitly show the connection between Jesus' baptism, a Christian's baptism and its mystical dimension.<sup>47</sup> The Christian shares in the light of Christ by receiving baptism. He is cleansed and illuminated, which makes possible the contemplation of the Threefold God.<sup>48</sup> Without the cleansing of body and soul there is no illumination and therefore no knowledge of God possible. Whoever purifies himself by baptism is illuminated and becomes « Godlike », *theo-eideis*, and receives the Logos.<sup>49</sup> The illumination that is realized by baptism appears to be not only a ritual, but also a mystical occurrence. Mysticism is understood as a desire for the knowledge and the experience of God. Gregory expresses it this way: « Enlightenment is the intense desire for the fullness of the satisfaction in those who reach for great things, or the greatest things, or what transcends the greatest ».<sup>50</sup> It is characteristic of Gregory that he relates so closely the purification by baptism, the enlightenment given by this sacrament, and the great light God gives the Christian.<sup>51</sup> It is also clear that the feast of that day celebrates both Christ's baptism and that of the Christian.

<sup>43</sup> « He put on the water of baptism and rays flashed out of it », quoted by Bradshaw/Johnson: *Feasts and Seasons* 143.

<sup>44</sup> Bradshaw/Johnson, *Feasts and Seasons*, 143.

<sup>45</sup> According to C. Mohrmann to replace the older name of Epiphania, from the moment that the celebration of the birth detached from the 6<sup>th</sup> of January and was placed on December 25<sup>th</sup>, Bradshaw/Johnson, *Feasts and seasons*, 149.

<sup>46</sup> « Il ne paraît donc invraisemblable, que la fête de l'Épiphanie a grandi comme la fête de la Manifestation du Seigneur, de l'apparition du Christ comme la Lumière divine qui éclaire tous les hommes », Vermeulen, « Le développement », 43.

<sup>47</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Discours, 38–41, Introduction, texte, critique et notes*, par C. Moreschini; traduction par P. Gallay, SC 358, Paris 1990, *Discours 39 et 40*, 150–311. The title: *Ê agia tôn Fôtôn êmera* is found in *Discours* 39,1, p. 150.

<sup>48</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Discours*, 40, 205.

<sup>49</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Discours* 39, 168v.

<sup>50</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Discours* 39, 164.

<sup>51</sup> In this manner C. Moreschini: « Introduction » 63, in: Gregorius de Nazianze, *Discours* 38–41.

Enlightenment as a gift of the Lord in his appearing is the mystical theme that we also find in Romanos Melodos, the great Byzantine poet who lived in the first half of the sixth century. Of the two hymns that he wrote on the occasion of Epiphany, all the strophes end with a refrain that is related to this. The refrain of the first hymn reads: « You have come, you have appeared, you the inaccessible light », while in every strophe the contact with that light is expressed differently.<sup>52</sup> In the 16<sup>th</sup> strophe John the Baptist relates how he has changed, been enlightened, now that he has seen and touched this inaccessible light. In the second hymn on Epiphany the refrain reads: « You who appeared and enlightened everything ». The 4<sup>th</sup> strophe ends as follows: « ...but we behold, because he wants it, and we touch him who has appeared and has illumined everyone ».<sup>53</sup>

Another aspect of this feast is the celebration of the mystical wedding of Christ and his bride, the Church. In the Syrian liturgy several texts on Epiphany can be found, that connect Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River with his marriage with the Church, sometimes as a bridal bath, sometimes as an actual wedding.<sup>54</sup> The idea of a bridal bath we of course already find in the letter to the Ephesians (5,25–27). A hymn about Epiphany, attributed to Ephraim the Syrian, praises the bridegroom Jesus, who purifies his bride in the water of the Jordan by means of his own baptism.<sup>55</sup> In another hymn, by Ephraim himself, on the wedding of Cana, we also find the theme of the Church as bride: « Jesus, behold, your people rejoices in your own wedding-party, chaste and beautiful ». This hymn it is not only

<sup>52</sup> « Èlthes, efanēs, to fōs to aprositou », Romanos le Melode: *Hymnes. Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes*, par J. Grosdidier de Matons, t. II, *Nouveau Testament, IX–XX, SC 110*, Paris 1965, 1<sup>er</sup> hymne de l'Épiphanie, 236–259.

<sup>53</sup> « ... alla theōroumen oti thelei, kai kratoumen ton fanenta kai fōtisanta panta », Romanos le Melode, *Hymnes*, 2<sup>e</sup> hymne de l'Épiphanie, 270–293, strophe 4.

<sup>54</sup> H. Frank osb, « Hodie caelisti sponso iuncta est Ecclesia. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und Idee des Epiphaniestes », in: *Vom christlichen Mysterium. Gesammelte Arbeiten zum Gedächtnis von Odo Casel OSB*, Düsseldorf 1951, 202vv.

<sup>55</sup> It concerns a dialogue between John the Baptist and Jesus. John asks: « Baptism, how shall it profit You? », to which Jesus answers: « The Bride you betrothed to Me awaits Me – that I should go down, be baptized, and sanctify her. – Friend of the Bridegroom, withhold Me not – from the washing that awaits Me ». Hymn of Epiphany 14, 27–28, see [www.newadvent.org/fathers/3704.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3704.htm). E. Beck does not include this hymn in his critical edition, which lets us suppose that it is a later hymn, ascribed to Ephraim. See: *Des Heiligen Efraem des Syrsers, Hymnen de Nativitate (Epiphania)*, übersetzt von E. Beck, Louvain 1959, CSCO, vol 187; *Scriptores Syri*, tomus 83.

about the Church, but also about the human soul as the fiancée of Christ, and his body as a bridal chamber.<sup>56</sup>

It was under Eastern influence that this feast was introduced in the West, not as a commemoration of a historical occurrence, but as a celebration of one or more related aspects of the mystery of salvation. The theme of water, related of course to Jesus' baptism, appears in the blessing of the water, that Gaul took over from the East, along with the custom of the blessing of the house. Rome and Northern Africa initially only knew historical feasts and had given a stable place to the feast of Christmas since 336. Reluctantly, the feast of Epiphany was accepted even there, without the celebration of Jesus' baptism, but with as its most important element the adoration of the Magi and, connected with that, the revelation of Christ to all peoples. Saint Augustine stressed that point in his six sermons on Epiphany: the core of this feast is the proclamation of Christ to all people, of whom the three Wise Men were the representatives. In sermon 202 Augustine mentions the fact that this is a feast with a Greek name that is known in the whole world.<sup>57</sup> The popes Leo the Great and Gregory the Great have left us sermons for Epiphany as well, in which they also only speak about the adoration of the Magi.<sup>58</sup>

This adoration and the lighting star could give rise to a mystical interpretation of the feast. In Saint Augustine's sermons and in the sermon on Epiphany of St. Gregory we find no trace of that.<sup>59</sup> Pope Leo usually also speaks about other matters on Epiphany, but is sensitive to the mystical dimension, for example in the 6th sermon on Epiphany, when talking about the Wise Men. Especially to the question how they came to offer the right gifts and to adore the Lord, he answers with reference to a mystical experience. They were called to know the true light, he says, the shining of divine grace undoubtedly worked in them. In the darkness of their hearts a new clarity appears, that is enlightened by the rays of the star. By means of a miracle, this star moves the minds of all those who have been touched by its light. It precedes them and brings them to adoration of God.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>56</sup> The 14<sup>th</sup> hymn about Faith, see S. Brock: *L'oeil de lumière, la vision spirituelle de Saint Éphrem*, Abbaye de Bellefontaine, Bégrolles-en-Mauges 1991, 216v.

<sup>57</sup> H. Augustinus, *Sermo 202*, PL 38, 1033–1035.

<sup>58</sup> Frank, « *Hodie caelisti* », 194.

<sup>59</sup> Saint Gregory the Great, *Homilia X in Evangelia*, PL 76, 1110–114.

<sup>60</sup> « ... adgnitionem veri luminis cernimus advocari, divinae procul dubio gratiae splendor operatur; et quidquid in cordibus tenebrosis novae lucis apparet, de eiusdem stellae radius micat: ut mentes quas suo fulgere contigerit, et miraculo moveat, et ad Deum adorandum praeundo perducatur », Saint Leo the Great: *In Epiphaniae solemnitate Sermo VI,1*, PL 22, 238. See also *Sermo III*, 204 and *IV* 217.



Now it is no longer baptism that is the basis for a spiritual experience, but the star leading the three Wise Men.

These moments from the history of Epiphany show its different layers, all connected with Christ's apparition. This appearing of Christ is passed on in two different images. The first is the symbolism of the light of Christ, shining with his baptism or from the star that showed the Wise Men their way, a light for which the human soul opens itself and by which it is enlightened. The second is the image of the wedding, the love between Christ and the Church or the human soul. In both cases these are themes that frequently occur in the history of mysticism.

### 3 EPIPHANY AS A MYSTERY-FEAST

In the liturgical texts for the current Roman Catholic feast of Epiphany we find a number of expressions that point to its mystical character. We shall analyze a selection of them, namely, the collect of this feast, two other texts from the proper of the mass, in which the term « mystery » is used, and the antiphon for the Benedictus. We focus not on their history but on their current content and usage.

#### 3.1 The Collect-Prayer

On the feast of Epiphany the collect prayer is as follows: *Deus, qui hodierna Unigenitum tuum gentibus stella duce revelasti, concede propitius, ut qui iam te ex fide cognovimus, usque ad contemplandam speciem tuae celsitudinis.* The text originates from the *Sacramentarium Gregorianum* and dates from the 8th century or earlier.<sup>61</sup> Without any literal citations, the prayer refers to Biblical texts like Mat. 2,2-9; John 20,29 and 2 Cor 3,18 and 5,7. It consists of one long, compact sentence that connects two main parts. In the first, the work of God the Father is commemorated, namely the revelation of his Son to the peoples; the second part makes the request to behold God's figure. The inner relation between the two halves is not clearly evident. However, starting with the concept of *revelasti*, which is central to Epiphany, we can connect the parts in three steps. First: God, you have revealed your Son to the peoples. Second: on the grounds of that revelation we, belonging to those peoples, have learned to know your Son in faith. Third: we ask you that we may know you not only in faith, but also in real beholding. In interpreting this prayer, we would point to a transition: what was a general, collective experience, destined for all peoples, can also be a personal

<sup>61</sup> *Das Sacramentarium Gregorianum nach dem Aachener Urexemplar*, herausg. v. H. Lietzmann, Münster 1921, 16, nr. 17.

spiritual experience. A human being desires to see what he or she believes in faith without seeing. It is this desire that is expressed in the prayer; the Latin text uses the word «contemplare», which is pre-eminently the term to express mystical contemplation. The object of this contemplation, the *speciem tuae celsitudinis*, can be translated as «the radiant beauty of your highness». *Celsitudo* is used as a royal term of address: Your Highness, and *speciem* is the exterior sight, the appearance, but also the beauty, the shining or luster. The personal seeing goes deeper than faith alone, it is a spiritual perceiving of God's reality, and that is what the community is praying for.

### 3.2 Two Prayers with the Concept «mysterium»

The concept of «mysterium» is not only etymologically related to «mysticism», but also with respect to content. Both refer to a secret or hidden and revealed reality and are closely connected to the idea of the apparition of God. That is why we will give some attention to this within the framework of Epiphany. Of the several times the word occurs in the liturgy of this feast,<sup>62</sup> we limit ourselves to two central prayers from the formulary of mass.

The preface that we find in the current mass has been extended by the conciliar liturgical reform. The second part, *cum in substantia nostrae mortalitatis apparuit, nova nos immortalitatis eius gloria reparasti*, is almost identical to the pre-conciliar text of the preface that is to be found in both the Gelasian and the Gregorian sacramentaries and originates in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>63</sup> This short preface is now preceded by the following line: *Quia ipsum in Christo salutis nostrae mysterium hodie ad lumen gentium revelasti*. This new whole becomes a unity by the coordinating *et* and by the rhyming verbs *revelasti* and *reparasti*, in which we can hear a saying from another preface<sup>64</sup> and in which there is a reference to the Nunc

<sup>62</sup> In the form of Mass we find it in the second reading from Scripture, Eph 3,2–3a.5–6, in the preface and in the prayer after communion. In the office of *Liturgia Horarum* it is cited in the second reading of the *Officium lectionis*, a sermon by pope Leo the Great and in the antiphon of the Tierce, a quote from Col 1,26.

<sup>63</sup> As a preface in the vigil-mass of Epiphany: see *Liber Sacramentorum Romanae Ecclesiae Ordinis Anni Circuli*, ausg. v. L.C. Mohlberg, Roma 1968, 14, nr 59; as a preface on the feast of Epiphany itself: see Lietzmann, *Das Sacramentarium Gregorianum*, 17, nr 17–3; as a preface on the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Epiphany: see *Das fränkische Sakramentarium Gelasianum in alamannischer Überlieferung*, herausg. v. K. Mohlberg, Münster 1918, 17, nr 109.

<sup>64</sup> From the preface of the vigil-mass of Epiphania; see Mohlberg, *Das fränkische Sakramentarium Gelasianum*, 14, nr 93.

Dimittis.<sup>65</sup> The preface in its current form is a thanksgiving for the revelation of the mystery of our salvation in Christ. This mystery is explicated in what follows, in which it is all about the paradox of Christ's appearance in mortality in view of the restoration of mankind by his immortality. The revelation of the mystery lies exactly in the saving significance of Christ's human appearance.

The other text which includes the word «mystery» is the *post-communio*. This text reads: *Caelisti lumine, quaesumus Domine, semper et ubique nos praeveni, ut mysterium, cuius nos participes esse voluisti, et puro cernamus intuitu, et digno percipiamus affectu*. The prayer requests that the Lord will precede his believers, always and everywhere, with his heavenly light, so that they will be able to receive the mystery in which God allows them to participate, with a clear view and with a proper feeling. It was introduced here after the last liturgical reform, but originates from the old prayer-material of the *Gelasianum*, where it acted as a *postcommunio* on the feast itself or later in the octave of Epiphany.<sup>66</sup> The heavenly light is clearly a reference to the star preceding the Magi. The mystery in which one has participated refers to the Eucharist, but also to the secret of God's self-revelation in the incarnated Christ. The prayer proper consists of the request to know that secret in the right way and to receive it with appropriate feelings. The personal appropriation of the mystery with reason and feeling is emphasized.

Comparing the usage of «mysterium» in these texts, we can observe a development in the meaning of the term. In the preface the content of the mystery is expressed, the appearing of Christ as a mortal human being, with the view to our immortality. In the *post-communio* it is about the appropriation by the faithful of this mystery. Here we see a clear mystical dimension. But probably the usage of the word «mystery» in the mass of Epiphany has something more to tell?

We will go into this question with the aid of the liturgical theology of O. Casel, especially his theory about the active presence of Christ, the mystery, in the liturgy.<sup>67</sup> The New Testament speaks about this in the sense of the plan and the decision of God to save the world by the sacrifice of his Son.<sup>68</sup> Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrec-

<sup>65</sup> Luke 2,33 Vulg: «Lumen ad revelationem gentium».

<sup>66</sup> Mohlberg, *Liber Sacramentorum Romanae Ecclesiae*, 15, nr 67; Mohlberg, *Das fränkische Sakramentarium Gelasianum*, 17, nr 114. In the Tridentine Missal it was the prayer after communion on the octave-day of Epiphania, see *Missale Romanum* 1954, 50.

<sup>67</sup> O. Casel osb, *Das christliche Kultmysterium*, herausg. v. B. Neunheuser OSB, Regensburg, 1960<sup>4</sup>, 22–24.

<sup>68</sup> Rom 8,28 ; 11,25 ; 1 Cor 2,7–10 ; Col 1,26 ; Eph 1,9–10 ; 3,5–9

tion are present in the liturgy and especially in the sacraments of the Church. Casel explains this aspect with the famous quote of Leo the Great: « What was visible of our Redeemer has passed over into the sacraments ».<sup>69</sup> The word « mystery » points, on the one hand, to a plan that was hidden and became revealed, but it also means an « act of God », a revelation, the realization of God's plan in history. It is not about a doctrine, but about an act, a reality, God's acting in Christ, especially in his death and resurrection. As the one who died and rose again, Christ is present in the liturgy. In his article « Mysteriengegenwart », Casel defines the Christian liturgy as « the ritual performance of the work of redemption by Christ in the Church and by it the presence of the divine act under the veil of the symbols ».<sup>70</sup> By the mystery of liturgy, the human person may enter into this redemptive event. Not only the sacraments, also the feasts of the liturgical year are a part of the mystery of Christ.<sup>71</sup> The events in the life of Jesus, not in their factuality, but in their meaning for salvation, are celebrated in the liturgical year so that the faithful can appropriate them.<sup>72</sup>

Epiphany is about the way this mystery is unveiled to human beings. God's mystery is revealed and man is invited to contemplate it. Christ is personally present to be met in all feasts of the liturgical year. However, in the celebration of Epiphany this encounter itself is the central issue. In this context Casel speaks about « Christ-mysticism »,<sup>73</sup> communion with the dead and risen Christ that is experienced in the different mysteries of the liturgical year. This is an experience of receiving and contemplating, which, according to Casel, also has a very active side: « The mysteries make it possible to share Christ's life and passion and thereby in a certain sense acquire divine grace ».<sup>74</sup>

Some aspects of the liturgy as mystery, the revelation and the appropriation of Christ's presence, may especially be applied to the feast of Epiphany. Its content has a reciprocal, relational character. The revelation of Christ is especially seen as an intense encounter.

<sup>69</sup> « Quod itaque Redemptoris nostri conspicuum fuit, in sacramenta transivit », *Sermo* 74,2 PL 54, 398A, quoted in Casel, *Das christliche*, 23.

<sup>70</sup> O. Casel osb: « Mysteriengegenwart », *Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft* 8 (1928), 145–224, 145: « ...der rituelle Vollzug des Erlösungswerkes Christi in der Ekklesia und durch sie, also die Gegenwart göttlicher Heilstat unter dem Schleier der Symbole ».

<sup>71</sup> Casel, *Das christliche*, 92v.

<sup>72</sup> Casel, *Das christliche*, 94.

<sup>73</sup> Casel, « Mysteriengegenwart », 167 en 170.

<sup>74</sup> « Die Mysterien geben vielmehr Gelegenheit aktiv Christi Leben und Leiden zu teilen und dadurch die Gnade im gewissen Sinne mit zu erwerben », Casel, « Mysteriengegenwart », 175.

In Christ, God lets his light shine towards the human being and he or she opens his or her mind and heart to it.

### 3.3 The *Benedictus*-Antiphon

Our third text from the Roman Catholic liturgy of Epiphany is the *Benedictus*-antiphon. The words are as follows: *Hodie caelesti sponso iuncta est Ecclesia, quoniam in Jordane lavit Christus eius crimina; currunt cum muneribus magi ad regales nuptias; et ex aqua facta vino laetantur convivae, alleluia.*<sup>75</sup> According to Frank, the antiphon is of Old-Gaulish or Roman origin, but with a Syrian background.<sup>76</sup> The song connects three events by placing them in the frame of the wedding of Christ and his Church.<sup>77</sup> The bridegroom washes his bride in the Jordan River; the Wise Men bring gifts at their wedding that is pictured as a royal wedding, and the guests rejoice in the water that turned into wine. The three motives of Epiphany as a mystical wedding, cleansing, homage and celebration, may well be compared with the three phases of the mystical ascent of man to God, as Pseudo-Dionysius (Syria, 5<sup>th</sup> century) describes them: purification, enlightenment and unification.<sup>78</sup> The theme of the wedding has of course always played a major part in Christian mysticism.

## 4 CONCLUSION: MYSTICAL ASPECTS OF EPIPHANY

The most important conclusions of the three discussed items will be brought together here.

In the many different meanings of the term *epiphaneia* that we found in paragraph 1 we can discover three lines: to come, to reveal and to shine. These three aspects usually occur together in the concept of « appearing », albeit with different nuances and aspects. Important in our argument is that the apparition, the epiphany, is directed towards an object, that it has a transitive character. It is about coming to someone, in order to make known to and shine on someone. We have also seen that in the neo-platonic, Christian Egypt of the third century, the term « epiphany » gained a mystical meaning, as « enlightenment of the human soul by the Word ». In that same

<sup>75</sup> *Liturgia Horarum iuxta ritum Romanum, I Tempus Adventus, Tempus Nativitatis*, Ed. Typica, Rome 1976, 459.

<sup>76</sup> Frank, *Hodie caelsti*, 217v.

<sup>77</sup> This connection of the *tria miracula* is made in some more texts, for example the hymn *Hostis Herodes* and the Magnificat-antiphon *Tribus miraculis* in which the threefold *hodie* is stressed, by which is suggested a synchronicity of the three signs.

<sup>78</sup> Denys l'Aréopagite: *La hiérarchie céleste*, Intr. par R. Roques, Études et texte critiques par G. Heil, Trad. et notes par M. de Gandillac, SC 58, Paris 1958, III.2 (165 B-C), 90v.

period and area the feast of this name came into being, in which this signification is present.

Paragraph 2 exposed some cardinal moments from the history of this feast, in which two themes presented themselves strongly. On the one hand there is the symbolism of the light of Christ, to which the human soul opens itself and which brings enlightenment. In the East this was mediated by Christ's baptism and the Christian's baptism, in the West by the appearance of the star to the Wise Men and their adoration of Christ. On the other hand there is the theme of the wedding, the bond of love between Christ and the Church or the soul. In both cases we are talking about themes that occur very frequently in the history of Christian mysticism.

In the paragraph 3, we looked at the liturgy of the current feast of Epiphany. Both the collect and the post-communio are to be qualified as mystical prayers. In both, one prays for a more intense, contemplative and pure perception and experience of God's presence in Christ. Both of the prayers that use the term « mystery » have a mystical dimension, in the sense that the word does not only signify the revealing of God's hidden plan, but also the knowing and the receiving of it in a ritual and spiritual way. The theme of the marriage between Christ and the Church, that occurs in several texts of *Liturgia Horarum*, also has a mystical character, especially where it concentrates of the love between Christ and the human soul.

A common characteristic of the texts we studied is that not only Christ's apparition, but also the person whom it is given to see, know and love this figure, is part of the scene. The receiver of the apparition is present, it is about mutuality. « The concept of epiphany reflects the religious conceptions about God's relation to the world, and, reversed, the expectations man has towards the divine ».<sup>79</sup>

We can conclude that the feast of Epiphany has a number of mystical aspects. In this paper we could only make a beginning in exploring this dimension. Mysticism is, as we saw, about a desire for and a persistent attention to the experience of God's presence, the beholding of his light. Liturgy is usually seen as a communal activity, while mysticism is connected with the contemplative actions of a person. It would be wrong to isolate the two ways of meeting God. Liturgy can offer the meditating, contemplative person not only a framework and a structure, but also meaning and content.<sup>80</sup> In the ancient Church there was no gap between personal spirituality and the liturgy of the Church. The mystery of Christ and his Church is

<sup>79</sup> Vermeulen, « Le développement », 9.

<sup>80</sup> Th. Quartier, « Kontemplatieve Liturgie », in: *Jaarboek voor Liturgieonderzoek* 29 (2013) 201–221, p. 206–208.

really present and out of it the mysticism of the divine-human encounter flowers.<sup>81</sup> Knowing and loving God was and is a matter of opening up for and accepting the mysteries being celebrated.<sup>82</sup> In one of his prayers, Origen gives a penetrating wording that can well be applied to the mystical experience of liturgy: « ... so as that the apparition makes light upon the face of my soul ».<sup>83</sup>

Johan TE VELDE

## SUMMARY

This paper presents an inquiry into the feast of Epiphany with a special interest in its mystical aspects. We focus on the dialogical and mystical relation between God and the human person as it is manifested in the texts and history of this feast. It is a form of theological reflection on its content, in order to clarify a part of its significance.

Our starting point is that liturgy has a mystagogical function in relation to mysticism: the liturgical ritual mediates the attention for and the experience of the encounter with God. Our hypothesis is as follows: Epiphany is a liturgical feast that points towards this mystical encounter and experience in different ways. Epiphany shows a number of features that show human beings experience God's presence.

In order to substantiate this thesis we observe this feast in three different ways, focusing on its mystical dimension. The first approach is philological research of the Greek term that is used as the oldest and still current name of the feast, namely epifaneia. The second is based on a selection of moments from the history of this feast in Eastern and Western Christianity. The third is the analysis of a number of texts from the current ordo of the Roman Catholic feast of the Epiphany of the Lord. Especially the concept of "mystery" interests us here. We use O. Casel's theory about the meaning of this term. Here as well, we discover a clear mystical dimension. In the last, concluding part, the different results are brought together. The feast appears here as the celebration of the loving encounter of God and his people, expressed in the marriage between Christ and the Church, but also in the love between the appearing Christ and the individual believer. We see that mysticism, as the personal attention to and experience of God's presence, is not alien to liturgy, but appears to be an integral part of it.

## RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet exposé nous étudions la liturgie de la fête de l'Épiphanie avec une attention spéciale à ses aspects mystiques. Nous nous orientons vers la relation dialogique et la relation mystique entre Dieu et l'homme comme elles se présentent dans les textes et dans l'histoire de cette fête liturgique.

<sup>81</sup> Casel, « *Mysteriengegenwart* », 200.

<sup>82</sup> Vermeulen, « *Le développement* », 25.

<sup>83</sup> « ...ina è epifaneia autou poièsè fòs epì tou prosopou tès psychès mou. » Origènes, *In Jer.* 19,11 in: Origène: *Homélies sur Jérémie*, trad. et ed. par P. Husson et P. Nautin, SC 238 II, Paris 1977, 220.

Nous essayons une forme de réflexion théologique qui concerne le sens de cette fête pour en clarifier la signification.

On assume que la liturgie a une fonction mystagogique: le rituel liturgique sert de médiateur entre la personne humaine et le mystère de Dieu, qui rend possible de lui donner notre attention et de le rencontrer. On parle de la mystique. Comment comprendre la mystique ? Notre point de départ, nous l'avons trouvé dans les travaux de Bernard McGinn. Cet auteur a donné une définition large de la mystique chrétienne. Pour lui la mystique est la préparation humaine pour, la conscience de et la réaction à ce qu'on peut décrire comme la présence immédiate ou directe de Dieu. L'hypothèse que nous proposons dit que la fête liturgique de l'Épiphanie évoque la rencontre mystique entre Dieu et l'homme de plusieurs façons différentes.

Pour étayer cette thèse nous prenons les pas suivants. On étudie la fête par trois perspectives différentes en vue de sa dimension mystique. D'abord par une orientation philologique concernant le terme qu'on emploie comme nom de cette fête, *epiphaneia*. Puis nous nous tournons vers quelques moments de l'histoire de cette fête dans la chrétienté de l'Est et de l'Ouest. On trouve dans les textes quelques fragments qui semblent attirer notre attention dans une certaine direction. Dans la majorité de ces textes l'apparition du Christ, généralement à l'occasion de son baptême, est décrite comme un événement lumineux qui touche l'homme dans son âme. De plus nous trouvons la symbolique du mariage mystique entre le Christ et son peuple, et l'expérience des mages à leur route vers Bethléhem. Troisièmement nous analysons quelques textes de l'Ordo actuel de la fête catholique de l'Épiphanie vers lesquels notre attention est attirée entre autres par le concept de « mystère ». Ici on trouve des textes qui concernent le mystère de la révélation divine et le désir de regarder, de contempler la lumière de Dieu en Christ. Les textes étudiés nous donnent une indication du fait que la fête de l'Épiphanie est une célébration de la rencontre affectueuse entre Dieu et son peuple, exprimée par l'image du mariage entre le Christ et son Église, mais aussi entre le Christ apparu dans sa gloire et le croyant individuel. Des études prolongées et plus étendues sont nécessaires. La mystique comme une attente personnelle de l'expérience de Dieu n'est pas étrangère à la liturgie. La fête de l'Épiphanie nous fait penser qu'elles sont intimement associées. La liturgie de la communauté veut être une invitation faite à l'individu à s'ouvrir à l'expérience de la rencontre avec son Dieu.